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A LETTER

TO

JAMES JAMESON, ESQ.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF NATURAL HISTORY, LECTURER ON MINERALOGY, AND KEEPER OF THE MUSEUM IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH;

Fellow of the Royal Societies of LONDON and EDINBURGH; of the Antiquarian, Wernerian and Horticultural Societies of EDINBURGH; Honorary Member of the Royal IRISH Academy, and of the Royal DUBLIN Society; Fellow of the Linnean and Geological Societies of LONDON; Honorary Member of the Asiatic Society of CALCUTTA; of the Royal Geological Society of CORNWALL, and of the CAMBRIDGE Philosophical Society; of the YORK, BRISTOL, CAMBRIAN, NORTHERN, and CORK Institutions; of the Natural History Society of NORTHUMBERLAND, DURHAM, and NEWCASTLE; of the Royal Society of Sciences of DENMARK; of the Royal Academy of Sciences of BERLIN; of the Royal Academy of NAPLES; of the Imperial Natural History Society of MOSCOW; of the Imperial Pharmaceutical Society of PETERSBURGH; of the Natural History Society of WETTERAU; of the Mineralogical Society of JENA; of the Royal Mineralogical Society of DRESDEN; of the Natural History Society of PARIS; of the Philomathic Society of PARIS; of the Natural History Society of CALVADOS; of the SENKENBERG Society of Natural History; of the Society of Natural Sciences and Medicine of HEIDELBERG; Honorary Member of the Literary and Philosophical Society of NEW YORK; of the NEW YORK Historical Society; of the AMERICAN Antiquarian Society; of the Academy of Natural Sciences of PHILADELPHIA; of the Lyceum of Natural History of NEW YORK; of the Natural History Society of MONTREAL, &c. &c.

BY CHARLES WATERTON, ESQUIRE,

OF WALTON-HALL.

WAKEFIELD:

RICHARD NICHOLS, BOOKSELLER.

1835.

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LETTER.

"O CANDOUR, WHITHER ART THOU FLED?—CERTAINLY NOT TO WALTON-HALL."

JAMESON'S JOURNAL FOR JANUARY, 1835.

SIR,

IF it be any satisfaction to you, I beg to inform you, that I feel the full force of your apostrophe. You have aimed a severe blow at me which I did not expect from you; nor do I think that I have deserved it, as I am not aware, that in all my life, I have ever written or spoken one unfriendly word against you. Too often it happens, that many a poor humble bee is trodden underfoot which never stung the passing traveller.

Through AUDUBON, you have aimed a blow at me;—through AUDUBON, I will level a shaft at you in my turn, with aim so just and true, that it will be utterly out of your power to ward it off.

It is a matter of perfect indifference to me, whether you praise or condemn Mr. AUDUBON.—That is entirely your own affair. Had you not condescended to have noticed me, in your recent review of his second book on the biography of birds, you might have given your lucubrations to the world, without animadversion from me; and continued them, on any future day, without ever meeting my censure or applause. If, however, my opinion were asked, I should say, that I do not consider you qualified to review a work on ornithology. Somehow or other, I happen to have acquired just a sufficient stock of ornithological knowledge, to enable me to perceive errors and misrepresentations innumerable in AUDUBON'S pages; and I have seen a work, recently from America, which convinces me, more than ever, that his statements are not to be relied upon.

Judge HALL, in the Western Monthly Magazine for July, 1834, page 347, says of AUDUBON'S biography of birds, "The exaggerations contained in these sketches are such, as to weaken our confidence in the entire work." Judge HALL then pronounces "the death of MASON" (Audubon has not even spelled the name right) to be "altogether fabulous." He remarks and proves further on, that the whole account of the "booming flood" of the Mississippi, is "overdrawn and calculated to mislead." In the

affair of the hurricane, the Judge shews by facts, that AUDUBON "forfeits all claim to the reader's credence." He goes on to state, that Kentucky was *not* discovered by BOON; and that BOON's stature did *not* approach the gigantic*;" nor, "did his "*muscular powers display* themselves in the manner "pretended." In a word, the Judge remarks that "this propensity for exaggeration is apparent "throughout Mr. AUDUBON's book; and that, how-"ever accurate his sketches may have been origin-"ally, he has colored them so highly, as to deprive "them of all resemblance of truth, and no western "man can read his descriptions without a smile of "incredulity." But to the point—

I rubbed my eyes, and began to suspect their powers of vision, when I read the following precious morsel of absurd fabrication in the Edinbro' New *Philosophical* Journal of *Science*, for April and June, 1827, conducted by JAMES JAMESON, Regius Professor of Natural History in the College of Edinbro.'

"To give you an idea of the long time this poi-"son retains its property, I shall relate a curious "but well authenticated series of facts, which took

* AUDUBON tells us, in page 503 of his Biography, that "the stature "and general appearance of this Wanderer of the Western Forests ap-"proached the gigantic. His chest was broad and prominent, his muscular "powers displayed themselves in every limb," &c. &c.

" place in a central district of the State of Pennsyl-
" vania, some twelve or fifteen years ago. A farmer
" was so slightly bit through the boot* by a rattle-
" snake, as he was walking to view his ripening
" corn fields, that the pain felt was thought by him
" to have been from the scratch of a thorn, not
" having seen or heard the reptile: upon his return
" home, he felt, on a sudden, violently sick at
" stomach, vomited with great pain, and died in a
" few hours. Twelve months after this, the eldest
" son who had taken his father's boots, put them on
" and went to church at some distance. On his
" going to bed that night, whilst drawing off his
" boots, he felt slightly scratched on the leg, but
" merely mentioned it to his wife, and rubbed the
" place with his hand. In a few hours, however, he
" was awakened by violent pains, complained of
" general giddiness, fainted frequently, and expired
" before any succour could be applied with success;
" the cause of his illness also being quite a mystery.
" In course of time his effects were sold, and a
" second brother, through filial affection, purchased
" the boots, and, if I remember rightly, put them on
" about two years after. As he drew them off, he
" felt a scratch and complained of it, when the

* I know the thickness of an American farmer's boot; and I also know, that the largest rattlesnake of America cannot strike his fang through it, so that the aperture through which the poison issues, can be seen inside the boot.

" widowed sister being present, recollected that the
" same pain had been felt by her husband on the
" like occasion : the youth went to bed, suffered and
" died in the same way that his father and brother
" had before him. These repeated and singular
" deaths being rumoured in the country, a medical
" gentleman called upon the friends of the deceased
" to inquire into the particulars, and at once pro-
" nounced their deaths to have been occasioned by
" venom. The boots that had been the cause of
" complaint were brought to him, when he cut one of
" them open with care, and discovered the extreme
" point of the fang of a rattlesnake issuing from the
" leather, and assured the people that this had done
" all the mischief. To prove this satisfactorily, he
" scratched with it the nose of a dog, and the dog
" died in a few hours from the poisonous effect it
" was still able to convey."

Pray, Sir, where were your brains, (whither had *they* fled ? Certainly not to Walton-Hall,) when you unluckily received and approved of, a narrative at once so preposterous, and so palpably fictitious ? I have too high an opinion of your well-known integrity, even to suspect for one moment, that you inserted it in your Journal, with the most distant intention of misleading your readers.—I attribute the rash deed solely and wholly to your ignorance ;—ignorance quite unparalled, and unpar-

donable in a REGIUS PROFESSOR of NATURAL HISTORY.

If I am rightly informed, Sir, you are proprietor of a MUSEUM; wherefore you must have had much more frequent and much better opportunities of improving yourself in ZOOLOGY, than generally fall to the lot of other scientific gentlemen.

Has then, the dignity of the Regius-Professorship, lulled you into such a fatal security, that you have never once thought it necessary to examine the formation of a serpent's fang? which had you done, you never would have admitted AUDUBON'S account of the rattlesnake into your Journal; and thus you would have avoided that, which, when this letter appears, must fill your friends with pity, and your admirers with regret.

AUDUBON expressly states, that it was the *extreme* point of the fang which had done all the mischief; and in order to prove the correctness of his "curious, "but well authenticated (mind that, Sir,) series of "facts," he introduces, to his everlasting confusion, a medical gentleman, who most opportunely discovered the *extreme point* of a rattlesnake's fang sticking in the boot which he had cut open; and then, this said medical gentleman (who was he?) gravely told the by-standers, that this "extreme point"

had done all the mischief. By way of putting beyond all doubt his important discovery, " he *scratched* with it the nose of a dog, and the dog died in a few hours."

Now, Sir, as we are upon snakes, let me ask you in the name of the old Sarpent, (as Jonathan calls him) when you had read this blundering narrative, did you not recollect that the *extreme* point of *all* serpents' fangs is a solid bone ?—and that the aperture, through which the poison flows when the snake is alive, is on the *convex* side of the curved fang, at a *distance* from the point. This being an absolute fact, it is utterly impossible that the dog could have been poisoned by a scratch. Suppose for an instant, there was poison in the aperture ; that poison, was in a dried state ; and before it could have been moistened, the booby of a doctor, would have had to have thrust the broken fang into the nose, till the orifice was covered ; and there it must have remained for some time, before its contents could be in a state to enter the circulation. Again, Sir, did it not occur to you, that the wound which the farmer received, and which was so slight, " that the pain felt, was thought " by him, to have been from the scratch of a thorn," could not, by any chance have been from the bite of a serpent ; as you must have known, or at least you ought to have known, that a sting from a snake's

fang, always causes instantaneous and most excruciating pain? So does the sting of our wasps and bees, which are mere pigmies to the smallest of the poisonous snakes. The *tooth* of a snake is fixed in the socket;—the *fang* of a snake is moveable, and invariably on the upper jaw. Now, I am decididly of opinion, that no rattlesnake could strike the point of his fang through an American farmer's boot. But granting that AUDUBON'S snake did it in this case,—then the point of the fang must have been rankling in old Jonathan Clodpole's flesh, all the time he was walking home; for the boot would fit just as closely to his leg, *after* he had received his wound, as it had done *before* he received it.

What I have said of the dog, will equally apply to the two younger Doodles, who got their deaths by jumping into their father's boots.

But, Sir, when you came to that part of the narrative, where you are told that the eldest son, twelve months after, put on his father's old tormentors, and walked to church in them; did you not marvel, how he could walk and sit in them all day, and only just get a *slight scratch* on the leg, when pulling them off at night to go to bed?—and when the other brother put them on about two years after,

and got his death also by *a scratch*, did you not wonder from whence the poison came ?*

However, Sir, to cut the matter short, and in order that I may not run the risk of annoying you by too many questions, I beg to assure you, that the story of this depopulating Munchausen boot, which you have swallowed without straining, was current when I was a boy. With the exception of a few interpolations by AUDUBON, this very same story (which he had the effrontery to tell you all in Edinbro', was well authenticated, and "took place in a "central district of the State of Pennsylvania, some "twelve or fifteen years ago,") was considered a good joke, some fifty or sixty years back. The late Professor BARTON, of the University of Pennsylvania, investigated it at the period of his publishing his pamphlets on the rattlesnake; and it turned out to be, AN ARRANT YANKEE-DOODLE HOAX.

I have done, Sir, for the present, though I have a scourge of fearful asperity, ready for other parts of

* Here we have two men and a dog poisoned by scratches. I challenge the *whole world* to produce one solitary instance of any animal being poisoned by the scratch of a rattlesnake's fang, or any other poisonous snake's fang. The formation of the fang itself shews beyond all doubt whatever, that this cannot possibly be the case. The wound is *always* a puncture, as though it had been done by the point of a pin.

" Mr. AUDUBON'S notes on the rattlesnake," which he saw swallow a large American squirrel *tail-foremost ;* to say nothing of the passenger pigeon, &c. &c.

Sometime or other, but not now, I may have occasion to comment on other papers, which have appeared in your Journal with the signature of AUDUBON attached to them ; and I may yet consider it necessary to show to the public, that you are no better qualified to review a work on birds, than you are to lecture on the poisonous fangs of snakes.

*CERVANTES formerly exclaimed, " Para mi solo " nacio Don Quixote, y yo para el. El supo obràr, y " yo escrivìr . Solos los dos somos para en uno." As far as a knowledge of the true habits of rattlesnakes is concerned, this quotation may be aptly applied to JAMES JAMESON, Esq. Regius Professor of Natural History in the College of Edinbro' ; and to Mr. JOHN JAMES AUDUBON, Fellow of the Royal Society of London.

If the contents of this letter should sting you, pray reflect, Sir, that you deserve to smart a little, for your wanton imprudence in holding up to

* Don QUIXOTE was born for me, and I for him. He knew how to manufacture, and I to write. We are just the boys for each other.

public animadversion, the conduct of a gentleman, who has never used you unkindly, either by word or deed. You,—are a Regius Professor, with above forty honorary titles after your name; I,—am a private individual scarcely known; whose care it is through life, never to be the agressor; but who will always resist to the utmost, any attack made upon him,—come from what quarter it may.

I gratefully attribute whatever knowledge I may possess, to the learned and inestimable Fathers of the Society of Jesus at Stonyhurst, in Lancashire. I have travelled in far distant countries to study animated nature; and many quadrupeds, many reptiles, and above five thousand birds, have passed under my dissecting knife; so that, I ought to know something of Zoology; and were I not fearful of being thought vain, I would add, that I consider myself your superior in that department of natural history.

Should you honor me with a reply, I promise you that I will take an immediate and dispassionate notice of it; and I will address to you, a second, a third, and a fourth letter, and so on. As you have first attacked me through AUDUBON,—through him I will continue to point my dart at you: it shall be done in the following manner. I will take passages

from some of his faulty pages, and then comment upon them :—his bird of Washington for example, in which I shall have to remark on the drawing,—or the Humming-bird, which he tells us can fly in *six* days, after it is hatched, &c. &c.

This mode of carrying on the warfare will answer well my ends. It will give me an opportunity of again bringing upon the stage, certain individuals, with whom I have not yet quite squared up accounts ; and at the same time, I trust it will be to you, a kind of—" cave ne titubes," that is, a hint—a warning, lest you make another false step, in your exertions to sound again in the public ear, " O can-" dour, whither art thou fled ?—certainly not to " Walton-Hall."

I have the honor to be,

Sir,

Your very obedient and humble Servant,

CHARLES WATERTON.

WALTON-HALL,
JANUARY 27th, 1835.